The critics love internationally bestselling "MASTER OF THE PAGE-TURNER" (*USA Today*) Jodi Picoult

"Picoult is a rare writer who delivers book after book, a winning combination of the literary and the commercial."
—Entertainment Weekly

"Picoult has become a master—almost a clairvoyant—at targeting hot issues and writing highly readable page-turners about them. . . . It is impossible not to be held spellbound by the way she forces us to think, hard, about right and wrong."

—The Washington Post

"Picoult writes with a fine touch, a sharp eye for detail, and a firm grasp of the delicacy and complexity of human relationships."

—The Boston Globe

"It's hard to exaggerate how well Picoult writes."

—The Financial Times

"Nothing is ever all said and done in a Picoult novel. One can imagine the ripples of these characters' lives echoing on and on, even after the last page has been turned. Odds are, you'll wish you hadn't turned it."

—San Antonio Express-News

Praise for the stunning #1 *New York Times* bestseller

HOUSE RULES

"Everyone, it seems, has an opinion on autism: celebs, politicians—not to mention the medical community. But to grasp on a gut level the emotional texture of what it's like to live with Asperger's syndrome (the highest functioning form of autism) or to love a family member who has it, you need to read Jodi Picoult's powerful new novel. . . . *House Rules* ranks among her best."

—*USA Today*

"Picoult delivers a multilayered tale enriched by her protagonists' imperfections. . . . With this sharply rendered cast, Picoult weaves a provocative story in which she explores the pain of trying to comprehend the people we love—and reminds us that the truth often travels in disguise."

—*People* (★★★★)

"*House Rules* is a page-turner . . . well-paced and thoughtful. And it certainly leaves readers with more compassion and understanding for sufferers of a condition that puts them always on the outside without a way in."

—*The Boston Globe*

"Complex, compassionate, and smart. . . . Picoult's superb new novel makes us inhabit Jacob's solitude and abide his yearning."

—*The Washington Post*

"Jodi Picoult's examination of a family dealing with the form of autism called Asperger's syndrome will touch all but the coldest heart."

—St. Louis Post-Dispatch

"Picoult's writing engages completely. Her tight, descriptive sentences paint a picture much fuller than the words themselves. . . . *House Rules* is a powerful and disturbing novel that probes Jacob's unconventional thinking, and in that way also lays bare the many assumptions those of us without Asperger's take for granted in everyday conversation."

—Tampa Tribune

More critical acclaim for Jodi Picoult and her "GRIPPING" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*), "RIPPED FROM THE ZEITGEIST" (*Publishers Weekly*) novels

"Provocative and relevant."

—Booklist

"Disturbing and comforting in the same breath."

—Daily News (New York)

"Emotionally charged."

—The Charlotte Observer

"Brilliantly told."

—People

"Genius."

—Providence Journal

"Will take your breath away."

—Entertainment Weekly

ALSO BY JODI PICOULT

Handle with Care
Change of Heart
Nineteen Minutes
The Tenth Circle
Vanishing Acts
My Sister's Keeper
Second Glance
Perfect Match
Salem Falls
Plain Truth
Keeping Faith
The Pact
Mercy
Picture Perfect
Harvesting the Heart
Songs of the Humpback Whale

HOUSE RULES

A Novel

JODI PICOULT

ATRIA INTERNATIONAL
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

ATRIA INTERNATIONAL
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Atria International export edition October 2010

ATRIA INTERNATIONAL and colophon are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-1-4391-7754-9
ISBN 978-1-4391-9931-2 (ebook)

For Nancy Friend Stuart (1949–2008)
and David Stuart

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have so many people to thank, as always:

My brilliant legal team: Jennifer Sternick and Lise Iwon; as well as Jennifer Sargent, Rory Malone, and Seth Lipschutz.

The CSIs who let me tag along: Cpl. Claire Demarais, Betty Martin, Beth Anne Zielinski, Jim Knoll, Lt. Dennis Pincince, Lt. Arthur Kershaw, Sgt. Richard Altimari, Lt. John Blessing, Detective John Grassel, Ms. Robin Smith, Dr. Thomas Gilson, Dr. Peter Gillespie, Detective Patricia Cornell—Providence Police, Ret. Trooper Robert Hathaway—Connecticut State Police, Ret. Lt. Ed Downing—Providence Police, Amy Duhaime, and Kim Freeland.

Katherine Yanis and her son Jacob, whose generous donation to Autism Speaks UK inspired the name of my fictional Jacob.

Jim Taylor, who provided the computer lingo for Henry, and who keeps my website the best one I've ever seen for an author.

Chief Nick Giaccone, for police procedure.

Julia Cooper, for her banking expertise.

My publishing team: Carolyn Reidy, Judith Curr, Kathleen Schmidt, Mellony Torres, Sarah Branham, Laura Stern, Gary Urda, Lisa Keim, Christine Duplessis, Michael Selleck, the sales force, and everyone else who some-

how keeps finding readers who haven't heard of me and bullying them into getting on the bandwagon.

My editor, Emily Bestler, who actually makes me forget that this is supposed to be work, and not fun.

My publicist, Camille McDuffie, who still gets just as excited as I do over the good press.

My agent, Laura Gross, who may lose belts and BlackBerries (and provides excellent comic relief during stressful tours) but who has never lost sight of the fact that we make a phenomenal team.

My mom. We don't get to pick our parents, but if we did, I still would have chosen her.

My dad. Because I've never thanked him formally for being so proud of me.

I spoke with numerous people who have personal experience with Asperger's syndrome: Linda Zicko and her son Rich, Laura Bagnall and her son Alex Linden, Jan McAdams and her son Matthew, Deb Smith and her son Dylan, Mike Norbury and his son Chris, Kathleen Kirby and her son David, Kelly Meeder and her sons Brett and Derek, Catherine McMaster, Charlotte Scott and her son James, Dr. Boyd Haley, Lesley Dexter and her son Ethan, Sue Gerber and her daughter Liza, Nancy Albinini and her son Alec, Stella Chin and her son Scott Leung, Michelle Destefano, Katie Lescarbeau, Stephanie Loo, Gina Crane and Bill Kolar and their son Anthony, Becky Pekar, Suzanne Harlow and her son Brad.

A special thanks to Ronna Hochbein, a mighty fine author in her own right, who works with autistic kids and not only was a font of information for me regarding vaccines and autism but also arranged for multiple face-to-face interviews with children and their parents.

Thanks aren't really enough for Jess Watsky. She needs something much larger—gratitude, humility, slavish devotion. As a teen with Asperger's, she not only allowed me to pick through her life and her mind and steal specific memories and incidents for fiction; but she also read every word of this book with lightning speed, told me what made her laugh and what needed to be fixed. She's the heart of this novel; I could not have created a character like Jacob without her.

And last (but never least): to Tim, Kyle, Jake, and Sammy. If you four were all I had to call my own, I'd be the richest woman on the planet.

CASE 1: SLEEP TIGHT

At first glance, she looked like a saint: Dorothea Puente rented out rooms to the elderly and disabled in Sacramento, California, in the 1980s. But then, her boarders started to vanish. Seven bodies were found buried in the garden, and traces of prescription sleeping pills were found in the remains, through forensic toxicology analysis. Puente was charged with killing her boarders so that she could take their pension checks and get herself plastic surgery and expensive clothing, in order to maintain her image as a doyenne of Sacramento society. She was charged with nine murders and convicted of three.

In 1998, while serving two consecutive life sentences, Puente began corresponding with a writer named Shane Bugbee and sending him recipes, which were subsequently published in a book called Cooking with a Serial Killer.

Call me crazy, but I wouldn't touch that food with a ten-foot pole.

1

Emma

Everywhere I look, there are signs of a struggle. The mail has been scattered all over the kitchen floor; the stools are overturned. The phone has been knocked off its pedestal, its battery pack hanging loose from an umbilicus of wires. There's one single faint footprint at the threshold of the living room, pointing toward the dead body of my son, Jacob.

He is sprawled like a starfish in front of the fireplace. Blood covers his temple and his hands. For a moment, I can't move, can't breathe.

Suddenly, he sits up. "Mom," Jacob says, "you're not even *trying*."

This is not real, I remind myself, and I watch him lie back down in the exact same position—on his back, his legs twisted to the left.

"Um, there was a fight," I say.

Jacob's mouth barely moves. "And . . . ?"

"You were hit in the head." I get down on my knees, like he's told me to do a hundred times, and notice the

crystal clock that usually sits on the mantel now peeking out from beneath the couch. I gingerly pick it up and see blood on the corner. With my pinkie, I touch the liquid and then taste it. "Oh, Jacob, don't tell me you used up all my corn syrup again—"

"Mom! Focus!"

I sink down on the couch, cradling the clock in my hands. "Robbers came in, and you fought them off."

Jacob sits up and sighs. The food dye and corn syrup mixture has matted his dark hair; his eyes are shining, even though they won't meet mine. "Do you honestly believe I'd execute the same crime scene twice?" He unfolds a fist, and for the first time I see a tuft of corn silk hair. Jacob's father is a towhead—or at least he *was* when he walked out on us fifteen years ago, leaving me with Jacob and Theo, his brand-new, blond baby brother.

"*Theo* killed you?"

"Seriously, Mom, a kindergartner could have solved this case," Jacob says, jumping to his feet. Fake blood drips down the side of his face, but he doesn't notice; when he is intensely focused on crime scene analysis, I think a nuclear bomb could detonate beside him and he'd never flinch. He walks toward the footprint at the edge of the carpet and points. Now, at second glance, I notice the waffle tread of the Vans skateboarding sneakers that Theo saved up to buy for months, and the latter half of the company logo—NS—burned into the rubber sole. "There was a confrontation in the kitchen," Jacob explains. "It ended with the phone being thrown in defense, and me being chased into the living room, where Theo clocked me."

At that, I have to smile a little. "Where did you hear that term?"

"*CrimeBusters*, episode forty-three."

"Well, just so you know—it means to punch someone. Not hit them with an actual clock."

Jacob blinks at me, expressionless. He lives in a literal world; it's one of the hallmarks of his diagnosis. Years ago, when we were moving to Vermont, he asked what it was like. *Lots of green,* I said, *and rolling hills.* At that, he burst into tears. *Won't they hurt us?* he said.

"But what's the motive?" I ask, and on cue, Theo thunders down the stairs.

"Where's the freak?" he yells.

"Theo, you will *not* call your brother—"

"How about I stop calling him a freak when he stops stealing things out of my room?" I have instinctively stepped between him and his brother, although Jacob is a head taller than both of us.

"I didn't steal anything from your room," Jacob says.

"Oh, really? What about my sneakers?"

"They were in the *mudroom,*" Jacob qualifies.

"Retard," Theo says under his breath, and I see a flash of fire in Jacob's eyes.

"I am *not* retarded," he growls, and he lunges for his brother.

I hold him off with an outstretched arm. "Jacob," I say, "you shouldn't take anything that belongs to Theo without asking for his permission. And Theo, I don't want to hear that word come out of your mouth again, or *I'm* going to take your sneakers and throw them out with the trash. Do I make myself clear?"

"I'm outta here," Theo mutters, and he stomps toward the mudroom. A moment later I hear the door slam.

I follow Jacob into the kitchen and watch him back

into a corner. *"What we got here,"* Jacob mutters, his voice a sudden drawl, *"is . . . failure to communicate."* He crouches down, hugging his knees.

When he cannot find the words for how he feels, he borrows someone else's. These come from *Cool Hand Luke;* Jacob remembers the dialogue from every movie he's ever seen.

I've met so many parents of kids who are on the low end of the autism spectrum, kids who are diametrically opposed to Jacob, with his Asperger's. They tell me I'm lucky to have a son who's so verbal, who is blisteringly intelligent, who can take apart the broken microwave and have it working again an hour later. They think there is no greater hell than having a son who is locked in his own world, unaware that there's a wider one to explore. But try having a son who is locked in his own world and still *wants* to make a connection. A son who tries to be like everyone else but truly doesn't know how.

I reach out to comfort him but stop myself—a light touch can set Jacob off. He doesn't like handshakes or pats on the back or someone ruffling his hair. "Jacob," I begin, and then I realize that he isn't sulking at all. He holds up the telephone receiver he's been hunched over, so that I can see the smudge of black on the side. "You missed a fingerprint, too," Jacob says cheerfully. "No offense, but you would make a lousy crime scene investigator." He rips a sheet of paper towel off the roll, dampens it in the sink. "Don't worry, I'll clean up all the blood."

"You never did tell me Theo's motive for killing you."

"Oh." Jacob glances over his shoulder, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "I stole his sneakers."

* * *

In my mind, Asperger's is a label to describe not the traits Jacob *has* but rather the ones he lost. It was sometime around two years old when he began to drop words, to stop making eye contact, to avoid connections with people. He couldn't hear us, or he didn't want to. One day I looked at him, lying on the floor beside a Tonka truck. He was spinning its wheels, his face only inches away, and I thought, *Where have you gone?*

I made excuses for his behavior: the reason he huddled in the bottom of the grocery cart every time we went shopping was that it was cold in the supermarket. The tags I had to cut out of his clothing were unusually scratchy. When he could not seem to connect with any children at his preschool, I organized a no-holds-barred birthday party for him, complete with water balloons and Pin the Tail on the Donkey. About a half hour into the celebration, I suddenly realized that Jacob was missing. I was six months pregnant and hysterical—other parents began to search the yard, the street, the house. I was the one who found him, sitting in the basement, repeatedly inserting and ejecting a VCR tape.

When he was diagnosed, I burst into tears. Remember, this was back in 1995; the only experience I'd had with autism was Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*. According to the psychiatrist we first met, Jacob suffered from an impairment in social communication and behavior, without the language deficit that was a hallmark of other forms of autism. It wasn't until years later that we even *heard* the word *Asperger's*—it just wasn't on anyone's diagnostic radar yet. But by then, I'd had Theo, and Henry—my ex—had moved out. He was a computer programmer who worked at home and couldn't stand the tantrums Jacob

would throw when the slightest thing set him off: a bright light in the bathroom, the sound of the UPS truck coming down the gravel driveway, the texture of his breakfast cereal. By then, I'd completely devoted myself to Jacob's early intervention therapists—a parade of people who would come to our house intent on dragging him out of his own little world. *I want my house back,* Henry told me. *I want* you *back.*

But I had already noticed how, with the behavioral therapy and speech therapy, Jacob had begun to communicate again. I could see the improvement. Given that, there wasn't even a choice to make.

The night Henry left, Jacob and I sat at the kitchen table and played a game. I made a face, and he tried to guess which emotion went with it. I smiled, even though I was crying, and waited for Jacob to tell me I was happy.

Henry lives with his new family in the Silicon Valley. He works for Apple and he rarely speaks to the boys, although he sends a check faithfully every month for child support. But then again, Henry was always good with organization. And numbers. His ability to memorize a *New York Times* article and quote it verbatim—which had seemed so academically sexy when we were dating—wasn't all that different from the way Jacob could memorize the entire TV schedule by the time he was six. It wasn't until years after Henry was gone that I diagnosed him with a dash of Asperger's, too.

There's a lot of fuss about whether or not Asperger's is on the autism spectrum, but to be honest, it doesn't matter. It's a term we use to get Jacob the accommodations he needs in school, not a label to explain who he is. If you met him now, the first thing you'd notice is that he

might have forgotten to change his shirt from yesterday or to brush his hair. If you talk to him, you'll have to be the one to start the conversation. He won't look you in the eye. And if you pause to speak to someone else for a brief moment, you might turn back to find that Jacob's left the room.

Saturdays, Jacob and I go food shopping.

It's part of his routine, which means we rarely stray from it. Anything new has to be introduced early on and prepared for—whether that's a dentist appointment or a vacation or a transfer student joining his math class midyear. I knew that he'd have his faux crime scene completely cleaned up before eleven o'clock, because that's when the Free Sample Lady sets up her table in the front of the Townsend Food Co-op. She recognizes Jacob by sight now and usually gives him two mini egg rolls or bruschetta rounds or whatever else she's plying that week.

Theo's not back, so I've left him a note—although he knows the schedule as well as I do. By the time I grab my coat and purse, Jacob is already sitting in the backseat. He likes it there, because he can spread out. He doesn't have a driver's license, although we argue about it regularly, since he's eighteen and was eligible to get his license two years ago. He knows all the mechanical workings of a traffic light, and could probably take one apart and put it back together, but I am not entirely convinced that in a situation where there were several other cars zooming by in different directions, he'd be able to remember whether to stop or go at any given intersection.

"What do you have left for homework?" I ask, as we pull out of the driveway.

"Stupid English."

"English isn't stupid," I say.

"Well, my English *teacher* is." He makes a face. "Mr. Franklin assigned an essay about our favorite subject, and I wanted to write about lunch, but he won't let me."

"Why not?"

"He says lunch isn't a subject."

I glance at him. "It *isn't*."

"Well," Jacob says, "it's not a predicate, either. Shouldn't he *know* that?"

I stifle a smile. Jacob's literal reading of the world can be, depending on the circumstances, either very funny or very frustrating. In the rearview mirror, I see him press his thumb against the car window. "It's too cold for fingerprints," I say offhandedly—a fact he's taught me.

"But do you know *why*?"

"Um." I look at him. "Evidence breaks down when it's below freezing?"

"Cold constricts the sweat pores," Jacob says, "so excretions are reduced, and that means matter won't stick to the surface and leave a latent print on the glass."

"That was my second guess," I joke.

I used to call him my little genius, because even when he was small he'd spew forth an explanation like that one. I remember once, when he was four, he was reading the sign for a doctor's office when the postman walked by. The guy couldn't stop staring, but then again, it's not every day you hear a preschooler pronounce the word *gastroenterology,* clear as a bell.

I pull into the parking lot. I ignore a perfectly good parking spot because it happens to be next to a shiny orange car, and Jacob doesn't like the color orange. I can

feel him draw in his breath and hold it until we drive past. We get out of the car, and Jacob runs for a cart; then we walk inside.

The spot that the Free Sample Lady usually occupies is empty.

"Jacob," I say immediately, "it's not a big deal."

He looks at his watch. "It's eleven-fifteen. She comes at eleven and leaves at twelve."

"Something must have happened."

"Bunion surgery," calls an employee, who is stacking packages of carrots within earshot. "She'll be back in four weeks."

Jacob's hand begins to flap against his leg. I glance around the store, mentally calculating whether it would cause more of a scene to try to get Jacob out of here before the stimming turns into a full-blown breakdown or whether I can talk him through this. "You know how Mrs. Pinham had to leave school for three weeks when she got shingles, and she couldn't tell you beforehand? This is the same thing."

"But it's eleven-fifteen," Jacob says.

"Mrs. Pinham got better, right? And everything went back to normal."

By now, the carrot man is staring at us. And why shouldn't he? Jacob *looks* like a totally normal young man. He's clearly intelligent. But having his day disrupted probably makes him feel the same way I would if I was suddenly told to bungee off the top of the Sears Tower.

When a low growl rips through Jacob's throat, I know we are past the point of no return. He backs away from me, into a shelf full of pickle jars and relishes. A few bottles fall to the floor, and the breaking glass sends him over

the edge. Suddenly Jacob is screaming—one high, keening note that is the soundtrack of my life. He moves blindly, striking out at me when I reach for him.

It is only thirty seconds, but thirty seconds can last forever when you are the center of everyone's scrutiny; when you are wrestling your six-foot-tall son down to the linoleum floor and pinning him with your full body weight, the only kind of pressure that can soothe him. I press my lips close to his ear. *"I shot the sheriff,"* I sing. *"But I didn't shoot no deputy . . ."*

Since he was little, those Bob Marley lyrics have soothed him. There were times I played that song twenty-four hours a day just to keep him calm; even Theo knew all the verses before he was three. Sure enough, the tension seeps out of Jacob's muscles, and his arms go limp at his sides. A single tear streaks from the corner of his eye. *"I shot the sheriff,"* he whispers, *"but I swear it was in self-defense."*

I put my hands on either side of his face and force him to meet my eyes. "Okay now?"

He hesitates, as if he is taking a serious inventory. "Yes."

I sit up, inadvertently kneeling in the puddle of pickle juice. Jacob sits up, too, and hugs his knees to his chest.

A crowd has gathered around us. In addition to the carrot man, the manager of the store, several shoppers, and twin girls with matching constellations of freckles on their cheeks are all staring down at Jacob with that curious mix of horror and pity that follows us like a dog nipping at our heels. Jacob wouldn't hurt a fly, literally or figuratively—I've seen him cup his hands around a spider during a three-hour car ride so that, at our desti-

nation, he could set it free outside. But if you are a stranger and you see a tall, muscular man knocking over displays, you don't look at him and assume he's frustrated. You think he's violent.

"He's autistic," I snap. "Do you have any questions?"

I've found that anger works best. It's the electric shock they need to tear their gaze away from the train wreck. As if nothing's happened, the shoppers go back to sifting through the navel oranges and bagging their bell peppers. The two little girls dart down the dairy aisle. The carrot man and the manager do not make eye contact, and that suits me just fine. I know how to handle their morbid curiosity; it's their kindness that might break me.

Jacob shuffles along behind me as I push the cart. His hand is still twitching faintly at his side, but he's holding it together.

My biggest hope for Jacob is that moments like this won't happen.

My biggest fear: that they *will,* and I won't always be there to keep people from thinking the worst of him.

Theo

I've had to get twenty-four stitches on my face, thanks to my brother. Ten of them left a scar cutting through my left eyebrow, after the time that Jacob knocked over my high chair when I was eight months old. The other fourteen stitches were on my chin, Christmas 2003, when I got so excited about some stupid gift that I crumpled the wrapping paper, and Jacob went ballistic at the sound. The reason I'm telling you this has nothing to do with my brother, though. It's because my mother will tell you Jacob's not violent, but I am living proof that she's kidding herself.

I am supposed to make exceptions for Jacob; it's one of our unwritten house rules. So when we need to take a detour away from a detour sign (how ironic is *that*?) since it's orange and freaks Jacob out, that trumps the fact that I'm ten minutes late for school. And he *always* gets the shower first, because a hundred billion years ago when I was still a baby Jacob took the first shower, and he can't handle having his routine messed up. And when I turned fifteen and made an appointment to get my learner's permit at the DMV—an appointment that got canceled when Jacob had a meltdown over buying a pair of new sneakers—I was expected to understand that these things happen. The problem is, something happened the next three times I tried to get my mom to take me to the DMV and, finally, I just stopped asking. At this rate, I'll be riding my skateboard till I'm thirty.

Once, when Jacob and I were little, we were playing in a pond near our house with an inflatable boat. It was my job to watch Jacob, even though he was three years older than I am and has had just as many swimming lessons as I have. We overturned the boat and swam up underneath it, where the air was heavy and wet. Jacob started talking about dinosaurs, which he was into at the time, and he wouldn't shut up. Suddenly I began to panic. He was sucking up all the oxygen in that tiny space. I pushed at the boat, trying to lift it off us, but the plastic had created some kind of seal on the surface of the water—which only made me panic even more. And sure, with twenty-twenty hindsight, I know I could have swum out from underneath the boat, but at that moment it didn't occur to me. All I knew, at the time, was that I couldn't breathe. When people ask me what it's like growing up with a brother who has Asperger's, that's what I always think of, even though the answer I give out loud is that I've never known anything different.

I'm no saint. There are times I'll do things to drive Jacob crazy, because it's just so damn easy. Like when I went into his closet and mixed up all his clothes. Or when I hid the toothpaste cap so that he couldn't put it back on when he was done brushing his teeth. But then I wind up feeling bad for my mom, who usually bears the brunt of one of Jacob's meltdowns. There are times I hear her crying, when she thinks Jacob and I are asleep. That's when I remember that she didn't sign up for this kind of life, either.

So I run interference. I'm the one who physically drags Jacob away from a conversation when he's starting to freak people out by being too intense. I'm the one who tells him to stop flapping when he's nervous on the bus, because it makes him look like a total nutcase. I'm the one who goes to his classes before I go to my own, just to

let the teachers know that Jacob had a rough morning because we unexpectedly ran out of soy milk. In other words, I act like the big brother, even though I'm not. And during the times when I think it's not fair, when my blood feels like lava, I step away. If my room isn't far enough, I get on my skateboard and tool somewhere—anywhere that isn't the place I am supposed to call home.

That's what I do this afternoon, after my brother decides to cast me as the perp in his fake crime scene. I'll be honest with you—it wasn't the fact that he took my sneakers without asking or even that he stole hair out of my brush (which is, frankly, *Silence of the Lambs* creepy). It was that when I saw Jacob in the kitchen with his corn-syrup blood and his fake head injury and all the evidence pointing to me, for a half a second, I thought: *I wish*.

But I'm not allowed to say my life would be easier without Jacob around. I'm not even allowed to think it. It's another one of those unwritten house rules. So I grab my coat and head south, although it is twenty degrees outside and the wind feels like knives on my face. I stop briefly at the skateboarding park, the only place in this stupid town where the cops even let you skate anymore, although it's totally useless during the winter, which is like nine months of the year in Townsend, Vermont.

It snowed last night, about two inches, but there's a guy with a snowskate trying to Ollie off the stairs when I get there. His friend is holding a cell phone, recording the trick. I recognize them from school, but they're not in my classes. I'm sort of the antiskater personality. I take AP everything, and I have a 3.98 average. Of course, that makes me a freak to the skating crowd, just like the way I dress and the fact that I like to skate make me a freak to the honors crowd.

The kid who's skating falls down on his ass. "I'm putting that on YouTube, bro," his friend says.

I bypass the skate park and head through town, to this one street that curls like a snail. In the very center is a gingerbread house—I guess you call them Victorians. It's painted purple and there's a turret on one side. I think that's what made me stop the first time—I mean, who the hell has a *turret* on their house, besides Rapunzel? But the person who lives in that turret is a girl who's probably ten or eleven, and she has a brother who's about half her age. Their mom drives a green Toyota van, and their dad must be some kind of doctor, because twice now I've seen him come home from work wearing scrubs.

I've been going there a lot, lately. Usually I crouch down in front of the bay window that looks into the living room. I can see pretty much everything from there—the dining room table, where the kids do their homework. The kitchen, where the mom cooks dinner. Sometimes she opens the window a crack and I can almost taste what they're eating.

This afternoon, though, nobody is home. That makes me feel cocky. Even though it's broad daylight, even though there are cars going up and down the street, I walk behind the house and sit down on the swing set. I twist the chains around and then let them untangle, even though I am way too old for this kind of stuff. Then I walk up to the back porch and try the door.

It opens.

It's wrong, I know that. But all the same, I go inside.

I take off my shoes because it's the polite thing to do. I leave them on a mat in the mudroom and walk into the kitchen. There are cereal bowls in the sink. I open the fridge and look at the stacked Tupperware. There's leftover lasagna.

I take out a jar of peanut butter and sniff inside. Is it just my imagination, or does it smell better than the Jif we have at *our* house?

I stick my finger in and take a taste. Then, with my heart pounding, I carry the jar to the counter—plus another jar of Smucker's. I take two slices of bread from the loaf on the counter and rummage in the drawers till I find the silverware. I make myself a PB&J sandwich as if it's something I do in this kitchen all the time.

In the dining room, I sit down in the chair that the girl always sits in for meals. I eat my sandwich and picture my mother coming out of the kitchen, carrying a big roast turkey on a platter. "Hey, Dad," I say out loud to the empty seat on my left, pretending that I have a real father instead of just a guilty sperm donor who sends a check every month.

How's school? he would ask.

"I got a hundred on my bio test."

That's incredible. Wouldn't be surprised if you wind up in med school, like I did.

I shake my head, clearing it. Either I've imagined myself into a TV sitcom or I have some kind of Goldilocks complex.

Jacob used to read to me at night. Well, not really. He read to himself, and he wasn't reading as much as he was reciting what he'd memorized, and I just happened to be in the same general geographic location, so I couldn't help but listen. I liked it, though. When Jacob talks, his voice rolls up and down as if every sentence is a song, which sounds really strange in normal conversation but somehow works when it's a fairy tale. I remember hearing the story about Goldilocks and the Three Bears and thinking she was such a loser. If she'd played her cards right, she might have been able to stay.

Last year, when I was a freshman at the regional high school, I got to start over. There were kids from other towns who knew nothing about me. I hung out the first week with these two guys, Chad and Andrew. They were in my Meth-

ods class and seemed pretty cool, plus they lived in Swanzey instead of Townsend and had never met my brother. We laughed about the way our science teacher's pants were hemmed two inches too short and sat together in the caf at lunch. We even made plans to check out a movie if a good one was playing on the weekend. But then Jacob showed up in the caf one day because he'd finished his physics packet in some freakishly short amount of time and his teacher had dismissed him, and of course he made a beeline for me. I introduced him and said he was an upperclassman. Well, that was my first mistake—Chad and Andrew were so psyched at the thought of hanging out with an upperclassman that they started asking Jacob questions, like what grade he was in and if he was on a sports team. "Eleventh," Jacob said, and then he told them he didn't really like sports. "I like forensics," he said. "Have you ever heard of Dr. Henry Lee?" He then yapped for ten straight minutes about the Connecticut pathologist who'd worked on major cases like O. J. Simpson and Scott Peterson and Elizabeth Smart. I think he lost Chad and Andrew somewhere around the tutorial on blood spatter patterns. Needless to say, the next day when we picked lab partners in Methods, they ditched me fast.

I've finished my sandwich, so I get up from the dining room table and head upstairs. The first room at the top is the boy's, and there are dinosaur posters all over the walls. The sheets are covered with fluorescent pterodactyls, and a remote-control *T. rex* lies on its side on the floor. For a moment, I stop dead. There was a time when Jacob was as crazy about dinosaurs as he is now about forensic science. Could this little boy tell you about the therizinosaurid found in Utah, with fifteen-inch claws that look like something out of a teen slasher flick? Or that the first nearly complete dinosaur skeleton—a hadrosaur—was found in 1858 in New Jersey?

No, he's just a kid—not a kid with Asperger's. I can tell, just by looking into the windows at night and watching the family. I know, because that kitchen with its warm yellow walls is a place I want to be, not somewhere I'd run away from.

I suddenly remember something. That day when Jacob and I were playing in the pond underneath the inflatable boat, when I started to freak out because I couldn't breathe and the boat was stuck on top of us? He somehow broke the suction-cup seal of the boat on the surface of the water and wrapped his arms around my chest, holding me up high so that I could swallow huge gulps of air. He dragged me to the shore, and he sat beside me shivering until I could figure out how to speak again. It's the last time I remember Jacob watching out for *me,* instead of the other way around.

In the bedroom where I'm standing, there's a whole wall of shelves filled with electronic games. Wii and Xbox, mostly, with a few Nintendo DS tossed in for good measure. We don't have any gaming systems; we can't afford them. The crap Jacob has to take at breakfast—a whole extra meal of pills and shots and supplements—costs a fortune, and I know that my mother stays up nights sometimes doing freelance editing jobs just so that she can pay Jess, Jacob's social skills tutor.

I hear the hum of a car on the quiet street, and when I peek out the window I see it: the green van turning in to the driveway. I fly down the stairs and through the kitchen, out the back door. I dive into the bushes, where I hold my breath and watch the boy spill out of the van first, wearing hockey gear. Then his sister gets out, and finally his parents. His father grabs a bag of equipment from the hatch, and then they all disappear into the house.

I walk to the road and skate away from the ginger-

bread house. Underneath my coat is the Wii game I grabbed at the last minute—some Super Mario challenge. I can feel my heart pounding against it.

I can't play it. I don't even really want it. The only reason I took it is because I know they'll never even know it's missing. How *could* they, when they've got so much?

Jacob

I may be autistic, but I can't tell you what day of the week your mother's thirty-second birthday fell on. I can't do logarithms in my head. I can't look at a patch of sod and tell you it has 6,446 individual blades of grass. On the other hand, I *could* tell you anything you ever wanted to know about lightning, polymerase chain reactions, famous movie quotes, and Lower Cretaceous sauropods. I memorized the periodic table without even trying; I taught myself how to read Middle Egyptian; and I helped my calculus teacher fix his computer. I could talk forever about friction ridge detail in fingerprint analysis and whether said analysis is an art or a science. (For example, DNA of identical twins is identical; we know that based on scientific analysis. But the fingerprints of identical twins differ in their Galton details—which evidence would *you* rather have if you were a prosecutor? But I digress.)

I suppose these talents would make me a hit at a cocktail party if (a) I drank, which I don't, or (b) I had any friends to invite me to a party, cocktail or not. My mother has explained it to me this way: imagine what it's like to have someone with an intense stare come up to you and start talking about medium-velocity-impact blood spatter patterns caused by objects moving between 1.5 and 7.5 meters per second and how they differ from high-velocity-impact spatter from gunshots or explosives. Or even worse, imagine *being* the person talking, and not getting the hint when the victim of your conversation is desperately trying to escape.

I was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome long before it

became the mental health disorder du jour, overused by parents to describe their bratty kids so that people think they're supergeniuses instead of simply antisocial. To be honest, most kids in my school know what Asperger's is now, thanks to some candidate on *America's Next Top Model.* So many people have mentioned her to me that they must think we're related. As for myself, I try not to say the word out loud. *Asperger's.* I mean, doesn't it sound like a Grade Z cut of meat? Donkey on the barbecue?

I live with my mother and my brother, Theo. The fact that we emerged from the same gene pool is mind-boggling to me, because we could not be more different from each other if we actively attempted it. We look like polar opposites—his hair is fine and so blond it could pass for silver; mine is dark and gets bushy if I do not have it cut religiously every three weeks (actually, part of the reason I get it cut every three weeks is that three is a good, safe number, unlike four, for example, and the only way I can handle someone touching my hair is if I know it's coming in advance). Theo is always caught up in what other people think of him, while I already *know* what people think of me—that I'm the weird kid who stands too close and doesn't shut up. Theo listens to rap almost exclusively, which gives me a headache. He skateboards as if the wheels are attached to the bottoms of his feet, and I do mean that as a compliment, since I can barely walk and chew gum simultaneously. He puts up with a lot, I suppose. I get upset if plans don't work out or if something in my schedule changes, and sometimes I just can't control what happens. I go all Hulk—screaming, swearing, hitting things. I haven't ever hit Theo, but I've thrown things at him and have wrecked some of his things, most notably a guitar that my mother then made me pay for in increments for the next three years of my life. Theo also is the one who suffers the brunt of my honesty:

CASE IN POINT 1

Theo walks into the kitchen wearing jeans so low that his underwear is showing, an oversize sweatshirt, and some weird medal around his neck.

Theo: 'Sup?

Me: Yo, homey, maybe you didn't get the memo, but we live in suburbia, not the 'hood. Is it Tupac Appreciation Day or something?

I tell my mother we have nothing in common, but my mother insists that will change. I think she's crazy.

I don't have any friends. The bullying started in kindergarten, when I got my glasses. The teacher made a popular boy wear fake glasses so I'd have someone to connect with, but as it turned out, he didn't really want to talk about whether archaeopteryx should be categorized as a prehistoric bird or a dinosaur. Needless to say, that friendship lasted less than a day. By now, I have gotten used to kids telling me to leave, to sit somewhere else. I never get called on the weekends. I just don't get the social hints that other people do. So if I'm talking to someone in class and he says, "Man, is it one o'clock already?" I look at the clock and tell him that yes, it *is* one o'clock already, when in reality he is trying to find a polite way to get away from me. I don't understand why people never say what they mean. It's like immigrants who come to a country and learn the language but are completely baffled by idioms. (Seriously, how could anyone who isn't a native English speaker "get the picture," so to speak, and not assume it has something to do with a photo or a painting?) For me, being in social situations—whether that's school, or Thanksgiving dinner, or the line

at the movies—is like moving to Lithuania when you haven't studied Lithuanian. If someone asks me what I'm doing for the weekend, I can't respond as easily as Theo would, for example. I'll stumble over how much information is too much, and so instead of giving a blow-by-blow description of my future plans, I'll rely on someone else's words. Doing my best De Niro *Taxi Driver* impression, I'll say, *"You talkin' to* me*?"* Mind you, it's not just my peers that I misunderstand. Once, my health teacher had to take a phone call in the main office, and she told the class, "Don't move—don't even breathe." Normal kids ignored the statement; a few Goody Two-shoes worked quietly at their desks. And me? I sat like a statue with my lungs on fire, until I was on the verge of passing out.

I used to have a friend. Her name was Alexa, and she moved away in seventh grade. After that, I decided to treat school like an anthropological study. I tried to cultivate an interest in topics that normal kids talked about. But it was so boring:

CASE IN POINT 2

Girl: Hey, Jacob, isn't this the coolest MP3 player?

Me: It was probably made by Chinese kids.

Girl: You want a sip of my Slushee?

Me: Sharing drinks can give you mono. So can kissing.

Girl: I'm going to go sit somewhere else . . .

Can you blame me for trying to jazz up conversations with my peers a little, by talking about topics like Dr. Henry Lee's take on the Laci Peterson murder? Eventually I gave up engaging in mundane chats; following a discussion about who was going out with whom was as hard for me as cataloging

the mating rituals of a nomadic tribe in Papua New Guinea. My mother says sometimes I don't even *try.* I say I try all the time, and I keep getting rejected. I'm not even sad about it, really. Why would I want to be friends with kids who are nasty to people like me, anyway?

There are some things I really can't stand.

1. The sound of paper being crumpled. I can't tell you why, but it makes me feel like someone's doing that to all my internal organs.

2. Too much noise or flashing lights.

3. Having plans change.

4. Missing *CrimeBusters,* which is on the USA Network at 4:30 every day, thanks to the wonders of syndication. Even though I know all 114 of the episodes by heart, watching them daily is as important to me as taking insulin would be to a diabetic. My whole day is planned around it, and if I can't have my fix, I get shaky.

5. When my mother puts my clothes away. I keep them in rainbow order, ROYGBIV, and the colors can't touch. She does her best, but the last time, she completely forgot about indigo.

6. If someone else takes a bite of my food, I have to cut off the part that his/her saliva has touched before I can eat any more of it.

7. Loose hair. It freaks me out, which is why mine is military short.

8. Being touched by someone I don't know.

9. Foods with membranes, like custards; or foods that explode in your mouth, like peas.

10. Even numbers.

11. When people call me retarded, which I am not.

12. The color orange. It means danger, and there's no rhyme for it in English, which makes it suspicious. (Theo wants to know why I can tolerate things that are silver, then, but I won't even rise to the argument.)

I have spent much of my eighteen years learning how to exist in a world that is occasionally orange, chaotic, and too loud. In between classes, for example, I wear headphones. I used to wear this great pair that made me look like an air traffic controller, but Theo said everyone made fun of me when they saw me in the halls, so my mother convinced me to use earbuds instead. I hardly ever go to the cafeteria, because (a) there's no one for me to sit with and (b) all those conversations crossing each other feel like knives on my skin. Instead, I hang out in the teachers' room, where if I happen to mention that Pythagoras did not really discover the Pythagorean theorem (the Babylonians used it thousands of years before Pythagoras was even a seductive gleam in his Grecian parents' eyes), they do not look at me as if I have grown a second head. If things get really bad, pressure helps—like lying under a pile of laundry or a weighted blanket (a blanket with little poly pellets inside that make it heavier)—because the deep touch sensory stimulation calms me down. One of my therapists, a Skinner aficionado, got me to relax to Bob Marley songs. When I get upset, I repeat words over and over and talk in a flat voice. I close my eyes and ask myself, *What would Dr. Henry Lee do?*

* * *

I don't get into trouble because rules are what keep me sane. Rules mean that the day is going to go exactly the way I am predicting it to be. I do what I'm told; I just wish everyone else would do it, too.

We have rules in our house:

1. Clean up your own messes.
2. Tell the truth.
3. Brush your teeth twice a day.
4. Don't be late for school.
5. Take care of your brother; he's the only one you've got.

The majority of these rules come naturally to me—well, except for brushing my teeth, which I hate doing, and taking care of Theo. Let's just say my interpretation of rule number 5 doesn't always synchronize with Theo's interpretation. Take today, for example. I included him in a starring role in my crime scene, and he got furious. He was cast as the perpetrator . . . how could he not see that as the highest form of flattery?

My psychiatrist, Dr. Moon Murano, often asks me to rate anxiety-producing situations on a scale of one to ten.

CASE IN POINT 3

Me: My mom went out to the bank and said she was going to be back in fifteen minutes and when it got to seventeen minutes, I started to panic. And then when I called her, she didn't pick up on her cell, and I was sure she was lying dead in a ditch somewhere.

Dr. Moon: On a scale of one to ten, how did that make you feel?

Me: A nine.

(Note: It was really a ten, but that's an even number, and saying it out loud would make my anxiety level blow off the chart.)

Dr. Moon: Can you think of a solution that might have worked better than calling 911?

Me (doing my best Cher from Moonstruck *impression): Snap out of it!*

I rate my days, too, although I haven't told this to Dr. Moon yet. High numbers are good days; low numbers are bad days. And today is a one, between my fight with Theo and then the absence of the Free Sample Lady at the grocery store. (In my defense, I have worked out an algorithm to predict what she's going to serve, and maybe I wouldn't have been upset if it was the first Saturday of the month, when she hands out vegetarian items. But today was a *dessert* day, for God's sake.) I have been in my room since we got home. I bury myself under my covers, and put a weighted blanket on top of that. I cue "I Shot the Sheriff" on my iPod on repeat and listen to that one song until 4:30, when it is time to watch *Crime-Busters* and I have to go into the living room, where the TV is.

The episode is number 82, one of my top five ever. It involves a case where one of the CSI investigators, Rhianna, doesn't show up for work. It turns out she is taken hostage by a man racked with grief over his wife's recent death. Rhianna leaves behind clues for the rest of the team to solve, to lead them to where she is being kept.

Naturally, I figure out the conclusion long before the rest of the CSI team does.

The reason I like the episode so much is that they actually got

something wrong. Rhianna gets dragged to a diner by her kidnapper and leaves a coupon for her favorite clothing store underneath her finished plate. Her colleagues find it, and need to prove it's actually hers. They process it for prints, using a small-particle reagent followed by ninhydrin, when in reality, you're supposed to use ninhydrin first. It reacts to the amino acid and then is followed by the small-particle reagent, which reacts with fats. If you used the small-particle reagent first, like they did in the episode, it would ruin the porous surface for the ninhydrin procedure. When I spotted the error, I wrote to the producers of *CrimeBusters.* They sent me back a letter and an officially licensed T-shirt. The T-shirt doesn't fit me anymore, but I still keep it in my drawer.

After watching the episode, my day definitely improves from a one to a three.

"Hey," my mother says, poking her head into the living room. "How are you doing?"

"Okay," I reply.

She sits down beside me on the couch. Our legs are touching. She is the only person I can stand having close to me. If it were anyone else, I would have moved away a few inches by now. "So, Jacob," she says, "I just want to point out that you did in fact survive the day without the free food sample."

It's times like this I am glad I don't look people in the eye. If I did, surely they would die on the spot from the contempt shooting out of mine. Of *course* I survived. But at what cost?

"Teachable moment," my mother explains, and she pats my hand. "I'm just saying."

"Frankly my dear," I murmur, *"I don't give a damn."*

My mother sighs. "Dinner at six, Rhett," she says, even though it's always at six, and even though my name is Jacob.

At different times, the media have posthumously diagnosed certain famous people with Asperger's. Here is just a sampling:

1. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
2. Albert Einstein
3. Andy Warhol
4. Jane Austen
5. Thomas Jefferson

I am 99 percent sure not a single one of them had a meltdown in a grocery store and wound up breaking a whole shelf of relish and pickle jars.

Dinner proves to be a painful affair. My mother seems driven to start a conversation, although neither Theo nor I is inclined to hold up the other end of it. She has just gotten another packet of letters from the *Burlington Free Press,* and sometimes she reads them out loud at dinner and we make up politically incorrect responses that my mother would never in a million years write in her advice column.

CASE IN POINT 4

Dear Auntie Em,

My mother-in-law insists on cooking roast beef every time my husband and I come to visit, even though she knows that I am a lifelong vegetarian. What should I do next time it happens?

Steamed in South Royalton

Dear Steamed,

Turnip your nose at her and walk away.

Sometimes the questions she gets are really sad, like the woman whose husband had left her and who didn't know how to tell her kids. Or the mom dying of breast cancer who wrote a letter for her baby daughter to read when she grew up, about how she wished she could have been there for her daughter's high school graduation, her engagement, her first child. Mostly, though, the questions come from a bunch of idiots who made bad choices. *How do I get my husband back, now that I realize I shouldn't have cheated on him?* Try being faithful, lady. *What's the best way to win back a friend you've hurt with a nasty remark?* Don't say it in the first place. I swear, sometimes I can't believe my mother gets *paid* to state the obvious.

Tonight she holds up a note from a teenage girl. I can tell, because the ink of the pen is purple and because the *i* in *Auntie Em* has a heart over it where the dot should be. *"Dear Auntie Em,"* she reads, and just like always, I picture a little old lady wearing a bun and sensible shoes, not my own mother. *"I like a guy who already has a girlfriend. I know he likes me cuz*—God, don't they teach you how to spell these days?"

"No," I answer. "They teach us to use spell-check."

Theo looks up from his plate long enough to grunt in the direction of the grape juice.

"I know he likes me because," my mother edits, *"he walks me home from school and we talk for hours on the phone and yesterday I couldn't take it anymore and I kissed him and he kissed me back . . .* Oh, please, someone get this girl a comma." Then she frowns at the loose-leaf paper. *"He says we can't go out but we can be friends with benefits. Do you think I should say yes? Sincerely, Burlington Buddy."* My mother glances at me. "Don't *all* friends have benefits?"

I stare at her blankly.

"Theo?" she asks.

"It's a saying," he mutters.

"A saying that means what, exactly?"

Theo's face turns bright red. "Just Google it."

"Just *tell* me."

"It's when a guy and a girl who aren't going out hook up, all right?"

My mother considers this. "You mean like . . . have sex?"

"Among other things . . ."

"And then what happens?"

"I don't know!" Theo says. "They go back to ignoring each other, I guess."

My mother's jaw drops. "That is the most demeaning thing I've ever heard. This poor girl shouldn't just tell that guy to go jump in a lake, she ought to slash all four of his car tires, and—" Suddenly she pins her gaze on Theo. "You haven't treated a girl like that, have you?"

Theo rolls his eyes. "Can't you be like other mothers and just ask me if I'm smoking weed?"

"Are you smoking weed?" she says.

"No!"

"Do you have friends with benefits?"

Theo pushes back from the table and stands up in one smooth move. "Yeah. I have thousands. They line up outside the front door, or haven't you noticed them lately?" He dumps his plate in the sink and runs upstairs.

My mother reaches for a pen she's tucked into her ponytail (she always wears a ponytail, because she knows how I feel about loose hair swishing around her shoulders) and begins to scrawl a response. "Jacob," she says, "be a sweetheart and clear the table for me, will you?"

And off goes my mother, champion of the confused, doyenne of the dense. Saving the world one letter at a time. I wonder what all those devoted readers would think if they knew

that the real Auntie Em had one son who was practically a sociopath and another one who was socially impractical.

I'd like a friend with benefits, although I'd never admit that to my mother.

I'd like a friend, period.

For my birthday last year my mother bought me the most incredible gift ever: a police scanner radio. It operates by receiving frequencies that regular radios cannot—ones assigned by the federal government in the VHF and UHF range above the FM stations, and which are used by police, fire, and rescue crews. I always know when the highway patrol is sending out the sanding trucks before they arrive; I get the special weather alerts when a nor'easter is coming. But mostly I listen to the police and emergency calls, because even in a place as small as Townsend you get a crime scene every now and then.

Since Thanksgiving alone, I have gone to two crime scenes. The first was a break-in at a jewelry store. I rode my bike to the address I heard on the scanner and found several officers swarming the storefront for evidence. It was the first time I got to see spray wax being used on snow to cast a footprint, a definite highlight. The second crime scene was not really a crime scene. It was the house of a kid who goes to my school, who is a real jerk to me. His mother had called 911, but by the time they got there she was standing at the front door, her nose still bleeding, saying that she didn't want to press charges against her husband.

Tonight I have just gotten into my pajamas when I hear a code on the scanner that is different from any I've ever heard, and I've heard plenty:

10–52 AMBULANCE NEEDED.
10–50 MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT.

10–13 CIVILIANS PRESENT AND LISTENING.
10–40 FALSE ALARM, PREMISES SECURE.
10–54 LIVESTOCK ON HIGHWAY.

Right now, though, I hear this:

10–100

Which means, *Dead body.*

I don't think I've ever gotten dressed so quickly in my life. I grab a composition notebook, even though it's a used one, because I don't want to waste any time; and I scrawl down the address that keeps getting mentioned on the scanner. Then I tiptoe downstairs. With any luck my mother is already asleep and won't even know I'm gone.

It's bitterly cold out, and there are about two inches of snow on the ground. I'm so excited about the crime scene that I am wearing sneakers instead of boots. The wheels of my mountain bike skid every time I go around a turn.

The address is a state highway, and I know I have reached the right spot because there are four police cars with their flashing blues on. There is a wooden stake with police tape (yellow, not orange) fluttering in the wind, and a visible trail of footprints. An abandoned car, a Pontiac, sits on the side of the road covered in ice and snow.

I take out my notebook and write: *Vehicle has been abandoned for at least twelve hours, prestorm.*

I duck into the edge of the woods as another police car arrives. This one is unmarked and ordinary, except for the domed police light magnetically affixed to the top. The man who gets out of it is tall and has red hair. He is wearing a black overcoat and heavy boots. On one of his hands, he has a Dora the Explorer Band-Aid.

I write this in my notebook, too.

"Captain," an officer says, coming out from between the trees. He's dressed in a uniform, with heavy gloves and boots, too. "Sorry to call you in."

The captain shakes his head. "What have you got?"

"A jogger found a body in the woods. Guy's half naked and there's blood all over him."

"Who the hell goes jogging at night in the dead of winter?"

I follow them into the woods, careful to stay in the shadows. There are searchlights illuminating the area around the body, so that the evidence can be fully recorded.

The dead man is lying on his back. His eyes are open. His pants are gathered around his ankles, but he is still wearing his underwear. The knuckles of his hands are bright red with blood, as are the bottoms of his palms, and his knees and calves. His jacket is unzipped, and he's missing one shoe and one sock. All around him, the snow is pink.

"Holy crap," the captain says. He kneels down and snaps on a pair of rubber gloves that he takes from his pocket. He examines the body up close.

I hear two more sets of footsteps, and another man steps into the pool of light, escorted by a uniformed officer. The uniformed officer takes one look at the dead guy, goes totally pale, and throws up. "Jesus H.," the other man says.

"Hey, Chief," the captain replies.

"Suicide or homicide?"

"I don't know yet. Sexual assault seems like a given, though."

"Rich, the guy's covered in blood from head to toe and he's lying here in his tighty whites. You think he got sexually assaulted and then committed hara-kiri?" The police chief snorts. "I know I don't have the vast detective experience you do after fifteen years on the job in the metropolis of Townsend but—"

I look down at the list in my notebook. What would Dr. Henry Lee do? Well, he'd examine the wounds up close. He'd analyze why there was only superficial blood—that pink transfer on the snow, without any dripping or spatter. He'd note the footprints in the snow—one set that matches the lone sneaker on the victim's foot, and the other set that has been matched to the jogger who found the body. He'd ask why, after a sexual assault, the victim would still be wearing his underwear if other items of clothing were still removed.

I am so cold I'm shaking. I stomp my frozen feet in their sneakers. Then I look down at the ground, and suddenly everything's crystal clear.

"Actually," I say, stepping out of my hiding place, "you're both wrong."

Rich

I don't know why I kid myself into thinking that I'll get anything done on the weekends. I have the best intentions, but something always gets in the way. Today, for example, I was determined to build an ice rink in the backyard for Sasha, my seven-year-old. She lives with my ex, Hannah, but she's with me from Friday night to Sunday, and she is currently planning on joining the U.S. Figure Skating team (if she doesn't become a singing veterinarian). I figured she'd get a kick out of helping me flood the tarp I set up in the back, bordered by two-by-fours that I hammered into place all week long after work, just to get ready. I promised her that when she woke up on Sunday morning, she'd be able to skate.

What I hadn't counted on was the fact that it would be so freaking cold outside. Sasha started to whine as soon as the wind picked up, so I nixed the plan and drove her to dinner in Burlington instead—she's a big fan of one place, where you can draw on the tablecloths. She falls asleep on the car ride home while I am still singing along to Hannah Montana songs on her CD, and I carry her upstairs to her bedroom. It's a haven of pink in a bachelor pad. During the settlement, I got the house, but Hannah got nearly everything inside it. It's weird to pick Sasha up from her other home and see her new stepdad sprawled on my old couch.

She stirs a little while I get her undressed and into her nightgown, but then she sighs and curls on her side beneath the covers. For a minute, I just stare at her. Most of the time, being the only detective in a one-horse town is a losing battle. I get paid crap; I investigate cases that are too dull to even make the police log in the local paper. But I'm making sure that Sasha's world, or at least this tiny corner of it, is a little bit safer.

It keeps me going.

Well . . . that and my twenty-year retirement bonus.

Downstairs, I grab a flashlight and head out to the aborted ice rink. I turn on the hose. If I stay up for a few more hours, maybe there will be enough water in the tarp to freeze overnight.

I don't like breaking promises; I leave that to my ex.

I'm not a bitter guy; I'm not. It's just that, in my profession, it's a lot easier to see actions as either right or wrong, without shades of explanation between them. I didn't really *need* to know how Hannah realized her soul mate was not the guy she'd married but instead the one who serviced the coffee machines in the teachers' room. "He started bringing hazelnut for me," she said, and somehow I was supposed to be able to understand that meant *I don't love you anymore*.

Back inside, I open the fridge and grab a bottle of Sam Adams. I settle down on the couch, turn on a Bruins game on NESN, and pick up the newspaper. Although most guys turn to the stocks or sports page, I always go for the entertainment section, because of the column in the back. I'm hooked on an agony aunt—that's the old-fashioned term for an advice column. She calls herself Auntie Em, and she's my guilty pleasure.

I've fallen in love with my best friend, and I know I'll never be with him . . . so how do I get over him?

My partner just walked out and left me with a four-month-old baby. Help!

Can you be depressed if you're only fourteen?

There are two things I like about this column: that the letters are a constant reminder my life doesn't suck as much as someone else's, and that there is at least one person on this planet who seems to have all the answers. Auntie Em is forever coming up with the most practical solutions, as if the key to the great riddles of existence involves surgically cutting away the emotional component and looking at just the facts.

She's probably eighty years old and living with a horde of cats, but I kind of think Auntie Em would make a great cop.

The last letter takes me by surprise.

I'm married to a great guy, but I can't stop thinking about my ex, and wondering if I made a mistake. Should I tell him?

My eyes widen, and I can't keep myself from checking the byline. The letter writer doesn't live in Strafford, like Hannah, but instead hails from Stowe. *Get a grip, Rich,* I tell myself silently.

I reach for the beer bottle, and I'm just about to take that first indescribable sip when my cell phone rings. "Matson," I answer.

"Captain? Sorry to bug you on your night off . . ."

It's Joey Urqhart, a rookie patrolman. I'm sure it's my imagination, but the new officers get younger every year; this one's probably still wearing a Pull-Up at night. No doubt, he's calling to ask me where we keep the extra Kleenex down at the station or something equally inane. The new kids know better than to bother the chief, and I'm the second in command.

". . . it's just that we got a report of a dead body and I figured you'd want to know."

Immediately, I'm on alert. I know better than to ask him questions—like if there are signs of foul play, or if we're talking suicide. I'll figure that out myself.

"Where?"

He gives me the address of a state highway, near a stretch of conservation land. It's a popular place for cross-country skiers and snowshoers this time of year. "I'm on my way," I say, and I hang up.

I take one last, longing look at the beer I didn't drink and spill it down the drain. Then I grab Sasha's coat from the front hallway and rummage through the mudroom for her boots. They're not there; they're not on the floor of her bedroom, either. I sit down on the edge of her bed and gently shake her out of sleep. "Hey, baby," I whisper. "Daddy's got to go to work."

She blinks up at me. "It's the middle of the night."

Technically, it's only 9:30 P.M., but time is relative when you're seven years old. "I know. I'm going to take you over to Mrs. Whitbury's."

Mrs. Whitbury probably has a first name, but I haven't ever used it. She lives across the street and is the widow of a guy who'd been on the job for thirty-five years, so she understands that emergencies happen. She babysat Sasha back when Hannah and I were together, and now-

adays when Sasha is staying with me and I get an unexpected call.

"Mrs. Whitbury smells like feet."

She does, actually. "Come on, Sash. I need you to get moving." She sits up, yawning, as I pull on her coat, tie her fleece hat under her chin. "Where are your boots?"

"I don't know."

"Well, they're not downstairs. You'd better find them, because I can't."

She smirks. "Wow, and *you're* a detective?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." I lift her into my arms. "Wear your slippers," I say. "I'll carry you to the car."

I buckle her into her car seat even though we're only going twenty yards, and that's when I see them—the boots, lying on the rubber mats in the backseat. She must have kicked them off on the way home from Hanover, and I didn't notice, since I'd carried her into the house.

If only all mysteries were that easy to solve.

Mrs. Whitbury opens the door as if she's been expecting us. "I'm so sorry to bother you," I begin, but she waves me off.

"Not at all," she says. "I was just hoping for a little company anyway. Sasha, I can't remember, are you a fan of chocolate ice cream or cookie dough?"

I set Sasha down inside the threshold. "Thanks," I mouth to Mrs. Whitbury, and I turn to leave, already mentally mapping out the fastest route to the crime scene.

"Daddy!"

I turn back to find Sasha with her arms outstretched.

For a long time after the divorce, Sasha couldn't stand to have anyone leave her. We came up with a ritual that somehow, along the way, turned into a good-luck charm. "Kiss, hug, high five," I say, kneeling down and

putting the motions to the words. Then we press our thumbs together. "Bag of peanuts."

Sasha leans her forehead against mine. "Don't worry," we say in unison.

She waves to me as Mrs. Whitbury closes the door.

I stick a magnetic light on top of my car and drive twenty miles over the speed limit before realizing that the dead guy won't be getting any deader if I'm five minutes late, and that there's black ice all over the roads.

Which reminds me.

I never turned off the hose, and by the time I get home, Sasha's rink might well have spread to the entirety of my back lawn.

Dear Auntie Em, I think.

I had to second-mortgage my house to pay my water bill. What should I do?
Troubled in Townsend

Dear Troubled,
Drink less.

I'm still smiling when I pull up to the spot where police tape is marking a crime scene. Urqhart meets me as I am checking out the abandoned vehicle, a Pontiac. I brush off a bit of snow from the window and peer inside with a flashlight to see a backseat full of empty gin bottles.

"Captain. Sorry to call you in," he says.

"What have you got?"

"A jogger found a body in the woods. Guy's half naked and there's blood all over him."

I start to follow him along a marked trail. "Who the hell goes jogging at night in the dead of winter?"

The victim is half dressed and frozen. His pants are pooled around his ankles. I do a quick canvass of the other officers to see what evidence they've found—which is minimal. Except for all the blood on the man's extremities, there's no hint of an altercation. There are footprints that match the victim's one remaining sneaker, and another set that apparently were made by the jogger (whose alibi already eliminated him as a suspect)—but the perp either brushed his own footprints away or flew in for the kill. I crouch down and am examining the crosshatch abrasions on the victim's lower left palm when the chief arrives. "Jesus H.," he says. "Suicide or homicide?"

I'm not sure. If it's homicide, where are the signs of a struggle? Or the defense wounds on the hands? It's almost as if the skin's been rubbed off raw instead of scratched, and there's no trauma to the forearms. If it's suicide, why is the guy in his underwear, and how did he kill himself? The blood is on his knuckles and knees, not his wrists. The truth is, we just don't see this often enough in Townsend, Vermont, to make a quick judgment call.

"I don't know yet," I hedge. "Sexual assault seems like a given, though."

Suddenly a teenager steps out of the edge of the woods. "Actually, you're both wrong," he says.

"Who the hell are you?" the chief asks, and two of the patrolmen take a step forward to flank the boy.

"Not you again," Urqhart says. "He showed up at a robbery about a month ago. He's some kind of crime scene groupie. Get lost, kid. You don't belong here."

"Wait," I say, vaguely remembering the teenager from

that robbery scene. Right now, I'm laying odds that this kid's the perp, and I don't want him to bolt.

"It's really very simple," the boy continues, staring at the body. "On episode twenty-six of Season Two, the whole *CrimeBusters* team got hauled up to Mount Washington to investigate a naked guy who was found at the summit. No one could figure out what a naked guy was doing on top of a mountain, but it turned out to be hypothermia. The same thing happened to this man. He became disoriented and fell down. As his core body temperature rose, he took off his own clothes because he felt hot . . . but in reality, that's what made him freeze to death." He grins. "I can't believe you guys didn't know that."

The chief narrows his eyes. "What's your name?"

"Jacob."

Urqhart frowns. "People who freeze to death don't usually bleed all over the place—"

"Urqhart!" the chief snaps.

"He *didn't* bleed all over the place," Jacob says. "Blood spatter would show up in the snow, but instead, there's just transfer. Look at the wounds. They're abrasions on the knuckles, the knees, and the lower hands. He fell down and he scraped himself up. The blood on the snow came from him crawling around before he lost consciousness."

I look at Jacob carefully. One major flaw with his theory, of course, is that you don't spontaneously start bleeding when you crawl around on the snow. If that were the case, there would be hundreds of elementary school children exsanguinating at recess during the winters in Vermont.

There's something just the tiniest bit . . . well . . . *off* about him. His voice is too flat and high; he won't make

eye contact. He's bouncing on the balls of his feet and I don't even think he realizes it.

On the spot where he's been bouncing, the snow has melted, revealing a patch of briars. I kick at the ground beneath my boots and shake my head. That poor, drunk, dead bastard had the misfortune to fall down in a field of brambles.

Before I can say anything else, the regional medical examiner arrives. Wayne Nussbaum went to clown college before getting his medical degree, although I haven't seen the guy crack a smile in the fifteen years I've been on the job. "Greetings, all," he says, coming into the clearing of artificial light. "I hear you have a murder mystery on your hands?"

"You think it could be hypothermia?" I ask.

He considers this, carefully rolling the victim forward and examining the back of his head. "I've never seen it firsthand . . . but I've read about it. It certainly would fit the bill." Wayne glances up at me. "Nice work—but you didn't need to pull me away from the Bruins in overtime for death by natural causes."

I glance to the spot where Jacob was standing moments before, but he's disappeared.

Jacob

I pedal home as fast as I can. I can't wait to transcribe my notes from the crime scene into a fresh notebook. I plan to draw pictures, using colored pencils and scaled maps. I slip into the house through the garage, and I am just taking off my sneakers when the door opens behind me again.

Immediately, I freeze.

It's Theo.

What if he asks me what I've been doing?

I have never been a very good liar. If he asks, I'm going to have to tell him about the scanner and the dead body and the hypothermia. And that makes me angry because right now I want to keep it all to myself instead of sharing it. I tuck my notebook into the back of my pants and pull my sweater down over it and then cross my hands behind my back to hide it.

"What, now you're going to spy on me?" Theo says, kicking off his boots. "Why don't you get your own life?"

It isn't until he's halfway up the stairs that I look at him and see how red his cheeks are, how his hair is windblown. I wonder where he's been, and if Mom knows, and then the thought is gone, replaced by the vision of the dead man's bare skin, blue underneath the floodlights, and the pink, stained snow all around him. I will have to remember all that, the next time I set up a crime scene. I could use food coloring in water, and spray it on the snow outside. And I'll draw with red Sharpie on my knuckles and my knees. Although I am not too keen on lying in

the snow in my underwear, I am willing to make the sacrifice for a scenario that will totally stump my mother.

I am still humming under my breath when I get to my room. I take off my clothes and put on my pajamas. Then I sit down at my desk and carefully cut the page out of the old, used notebook so that I don't have to hear the sound of paper being crumpled or torn. I take out a fresh spiral notebook and begin to sketch the crime scene.

Go figure. On a scale of one to ten, this day's turned out to be an eleven.

CASE 2: IRONY 101

Imette St. Guillen was an honors student pursuing a degree in criminal justice in New York. One winter night in 2006, she went out drinking with her friends, eventually splitting from them and heading to SoHo, where she called a friend to say she was at a bar. She never returned home. Instead, her naked body was found fourteen miles away, in a deserted area off the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn, wrapped in a flowered bedspread. Her hair had been cut off on one side, her hands and feet were secured with plastic ties, she'd been gagged with a sock, and her face was wrapped in packaging tape. She had been raped, sodomized, and suffocated.

Blood was found on one of those plastic ties, but DNA evidence revealed that it didn't belong to the victim. Instead, it was matched to Darryl Littlejohn, a bouncer who had been asked to remove the drunk young woman from the bar at around 4:00 A.M. Witnesses said they argued before leaving the bar.

Fibers were also found in Littlejohn's residence that matched those on the packing tape on the victim's body.

Littlejohn was also arraigned for a second kidnapping and assault of another college student who managed to get away from him after he imperson-

ated a police officer, handcuffed her, and threw her into his van.

And Imette St. Guillen, tragically, went from being a student of criminal justice to being the lesson taught by professors of forensic DNA analysis.

2

Emma

I used to have friends. Back before I had children, when I was working at a textbook publishing company outside of Boston, I'd hang out with some of the other editors after hours. We'd go for sushi, or to see a movie. When I met Henry—he was a technical consultant on a computer programming textbook—my friends were the ones who encouraged me to ask him on a date, since he seemed too shy to ask me. They leaned over my cubicle, laughing, asking if he had a Superman side underneath all that Clark Kent. And when Henry and I got married, they were bridesmaids.

Then I got pregnant, and suddenly the people I could relate to were enrolled in my birthing class, practicing their breathing and talking about the best deals on Diaper Genies. After we had our babies, three of the other mothers and I formed a casual playgroup. We rotated hosting duties. The adults would sit on the couch and gossip while the babies rolled around on the floor with a collection of toys.

Our children got older and started to play *with* each other instead of *beside* each other. All of them, that is, except Jacob. My friends' boys zoomed Matchbox cars all over the carpet, but Jacob lined them up with military precision, bumper to bumper. While the other kids colored outside the lines, Jacob drew neat little blocks in a perfect rainbow spectrum.

I didn't notice, at first, when my friends forgot to mention at whose house the next playgroup was taking place. I didn't read between the lines when I hosted and two of the mothers begged off because of previous engagements. But that afternoon, Jacob got frustrated when my friend's daughter reached for the truck whose wheels he was spinning, and he hit her so hard that she fell against the edge of the coffee table. "I can't do this anymore," my friend said, gathering up her shrieking child. "I'm sorry, Emma."

"But it was an accident! Jacob didn't understand what he was doing!"

She stared at me. "Do *you*?"

After that, I didn't really have friends anymore. Who had time, with all the early intervention specialists that were occupying every minute of Jacob's life? I spent the entire day on the carpet with him, forcing him to interact, and at night I stayed up reading the latest books about autism research—as if I might find a solution that even the experts couldn't. Eventually, I met families at Theo's preschool—who were welcoming at first but distanced themselves when they met Theo's older brother; when they invited us for dinner and all I could talk about was how a cream of transdermal glutathione had helped some autistic kids, who couldn't produce enough of the substance themselves to bind to and remove toxins from the body.

Isolation. A fixation on one particular subject. An inability to connect socially.

Jacob was the one diagnosed, but I might as well have Asperger's, too.

When I come downstairs at seven in the morning, Jacob is already sitting at the kitchen table, showered and dressed. An ordinary teenager would sleep in till noon on a Sunday—Theo will, certainly—but then again, Jacob isn't ordinary. His routine of getting up for school trumps the fact that it's a weekend and there's no urgency to leave the house. Even when it is a snow day and school is canceled, Jacob will get dressed instead of going back to bed.

He is poring over the Sunday paper. "Since when do you read the paper?" I ask.

"What kind of mother doesn't want her son to be aware of current events?"

"Yeah, I'm not falling for that one. Let me guess—you're clipping Staples coupons for Krazy Glue?" Jacob goes through that stuff like water; it's part of the process used to get fingerprints off objects, and it's a common occurrence in this household for something to go missing—my car keys, Theo's toothbrush—and then to resurface beneath the overturned fish tank Jacob uses to fume for prints.

I measure out enough coffee into the automatic drip to make me human and then get started on breakfast for Jacob. It's a challenge: he doesn't eat glutens and he doesn't eat caseins—basically, that means no wheat, oat, rye, barley, or dairy. Since there's no cure yet for Asperger's, we treat the symptoms, and for some reason, if I regulate his diet his behavior improves. When he cheats, like

he did at Christmas, I can see him slipping backward—stimming or having meltdowns. Frankly, with 1 in 100 kids in the United States being diagnosed on the spectrum, I bet I could have a top-rated show on the Food Network: *Alimentary Autism.* Jacob doesn't share my culinary enthusiasm. He says that I'm what you'd get if you crossed Jenny Craig with Josef Mengele.

Five days of the week, in addition to having a limited diet, Jacob eats by color. I don't really remember how this started, but it's a routine: all Monday food is green, all Tuesday food is red, all Wednesday food is yellow, and so on. For some reason this helped with his sense of structure. Weekends, though, are free-for-alls, so this morning my breakfast spread includes defrosted homemade tapioca rice muffins, and EnviroKidz Koala Crisp cereal with soy milk. I fry up some Applegate Farms turkey bacon and set out Skippy peanut butter and gluten-free bread. I have a three-inch binder full of food labels and toll-free numbers that is my chef's Bible. I also have grape juice, because Jacob mixes it with his liposome-enclosed glutathione—one teaspoon, plus a quarter teaspoon of vitamin C powder. It still tastes like sulfur, but it's better than the previous alternative—a cream he rubbed on his feet and covered with socks because it smelled so bad. The downside of the glutathione, though, pales in comparison to its upside: binding and removing toxins that Jacob's body can't do itself, and leaving him with better mental acuity.

The food is only part of the buffet.

I take out the tiny silicone bowls we use for Jacob's supplements. Every day he takes a multivitamin, a taurine capsule, and an omega-3 tablet. The taurine prevents meltdowns; the fatty acids help with mental flexibility. He

lifts the newspaper up in front of his face as I set down the two treatments he hates the most: the oxytocin nasal spray and the B12 shot he injects himself, both of which help with anxiety.

"You can hide but you can't run," I say, tugging down the edge of the newspaper.

You would think that the shot is the worst for him, but he actually lifts up his shirt and pinches his stomach to inject himself without much fanfare. However, for a kid who's got sensory issues, using a nasal spray is like waterboarding. Every day I watch Jacob stare down that bottle and finally convince himself he will be able to handle the feeling of the liquid dripping down his throat. And every day, it breaks my heart.

It goes without saying that none of these supplements—which cost hundreds of dollars each month—are covered by medical insurance.

I put a plate of muffins in front of him as he turns another page in the paper. "Did you brush your teeth?"

"Yes," Jacob mutters.

I put my hand down on the paper so that it blocks his view. "Really?"

The few times Jacob lies, it's so obvious to me that all I have to do is raise an eyebrow and he caves. The only times I've ever even seen him attempt dishonesty are when he's asked to do something he doesn't want to do—like take his supplements or brush his teeth—or to avoid conflict. In those cases, he'll say what he thinks I want to hear. "I'll do it after I eat," he promises, and I know he will. "Yes!" he crows suddenly. "It's in here!"

"What?"

Jacob leans over, reading aloud. "Police in Townsend